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ABSTRACT

This guide discusses issues related to how and what kinds of information needs to be provided to college and university governing boards. It notes that many institutions thwart their own good intentions to keep trustees informed by providing too much information, inappropriate levels of detail, lack of governance perspective or strategic relevance, and lack of context. The guide goes on to urge institutions to present board members with "dashboard reports" that provide key data in graphic and narrative formats that remain consistent from meeting to meeting, with more detailed information presented as committee reports or as background materials. It notes that effective board information systems must concentrate on data relevant to institutional values, mission, and strategy rather than on administrative matters, and should include information on service mix, service quality, resource acquisition, and resource management. The guide also urges institutions to provide governing board members with effective and comprehensive orientation programs, trustee handbooks, and board books that help trustees focus on key issues. (MDM)

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BOARD BASICS

STRATEGIC DECISIONS

A GUIDE TO BOARD INFORMATION SYSTEMS

LAWRENCE M. BUTLER

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Lawrence M. Butler

Lawrence M. Butler is a senior fellow and former chairman of The Cheswick Center, a charitable trust dedicated to improving governance in nonprofit organizations. He also is coauthor of *Board Information Systems* (The Cheswick Center), and he was the principal investigator of a multiyear project funded by the Lilly Endowment that demonstrated the value of specially designed board-information systems to enhance governance in a variety of settings, including colleges and universities. Consequently, he established a consulting service that assists organizations in enhancing the communications power of board information.

In addition to serving as a consultant and meeting facilitator for governing boards and senior management groups, Butler is cofounder and principal of Institutional Strategy Associates, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in strategic and program planning for nonprofit institutions. Previously, he was a senior manager with the Boston Consulting Group, Inc. Butler has an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School and a B.A. from Harvard College.

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A Guide to Board Information Systems

Trustees face a list of challenges that seem to grow in complexity and number from one meeting to the next, requiring increasing amounts of their expertise, knowledge, and time. Often, their ability to respond to the challenges they confront depends on how well informed they are about the institutions they govern. Many institutions thwart their own good intentions to keep trustees informed by making one or more of the following misjudgments:

Data Overload. Trustees typically receive pounds of paper, which can create the illusion of an informed board but in reality contributes to board disorientation and frustration.

Inappropriate Levels of Detail. Too much detail can lead a board to micromanage the institution. Too little can send the board on a frustrating fishing expedition.

Lack of Governance Perspective. Effective governance requires information that addresses mission, fiduciary responsibilities, institutional liability, environmental trends, opportunities for collaboration, and the needs of donors and constituents. Information that is a subset of a management-information system tends to underplay these governance concerns.

Lack of Strategic Relevance. Information that is disconnected from strategic issues (those that affect the long-term viability of an institution) diffuses the board's focus.

Insufficient Distribution. Information distributed only to a few board members can undercut the board's authority. (Only the full board is empowered to act on behalf of the institution.) Further, it erodes the board's common base of understanding.

Inattention to Time Constraints. Time is a trustee's most valuable resource. Information that is excessive, too detailed, or tangential to governance contributes to misspent time, as does information presented in long narratives unsupported by graphics.

Reliance on Anecdote. Often, hearsay, inferences from isolated episodes, and inconsistently derived "facts" tend to surface in the absence of mutually agreed upon, objective performance indicators. Not only can they cause discussions to go awry, but they also waste valuable time and energy.

Lack of Context. Data without reference to context—for example, predetermined standards of performance (such as budgets), performance in previous periods, or peer institutions—provide insufficient meaning for trustees to provide relevant advice or guidance.

To help trustees make decisions that advance and support their institutions, campus officials need to devise board-information systems that provide data on key aspects of institutional performance. These data must be sensitive to mission, focused strategically, and conveyed in formats and at levels of detail appropriate to the needs of time-constrained board members.

To create an effective board-information system, consider the following questions (which frequently are asked by trustees):

- Most boards receive plenty of information, but what does it mean?
- Boards shouldn't rubber-stamp administrative decisions or proposals, nor should they micromanage them. How can trustees receive information relevant to governing?
- The level of knowledge among trustees on the same board often varies greatly. How can all trustees get up to speed so they can act collectively as a board?

What Does It Mean?

To make sound decisions, the board must monitor the institution's performance so it understands the facts and their significance. The following can facilitate board decisions without overwhelming trustees with data.

Dashboard Reports. An effective technique in focusing a board's attention on key issues is the dashboard report. Just as the instrument panel of a car enables drivers to see key gauges at a glance, dashboard reports present key data quickly in formats consistent from meeting to meeting. Each institution should develop its own set of dashboard reports, depending on its mission, financial condition, academic programs, and so on.

DASHBOARD REPORTS SHOULD ENABLE EACH TRUSTEE TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF THE DATA.

Dashboard reports deliver information in graphic and narrative form to accommodate different learning styles. The goal of a dashboard report is not to ensure each board member receives exactly the same message in the same way. Rather, the reports should enable each trustee to understand the meaning of the data. By asking questions and sharing ideas, the entire board gains an understanding more complete than any individual could develop.

Figures 1 and 2 on the following pages show selected pages from a set of interrelated dashboard reports for a hypothetical four-year, liberal arts college. Figure 1 is a diagram that introduces these reports, serves as a roadmap that portrays interrelationships among them, and provides a framework to orient the user. Figure 2 is an example of one dashboard page (in this case, revenues) of several identified in Figure 1. Other dashboard reports in the set would similarily combine graphic and narrative elements. An essential characteristic of all dashboard reports is that related indicators (for example, tuition and fees, endowment support, and gifts, as shown in Figure 2) should be displayed on a single page so readers can see connections.

Although such a set of reports can be reviewed as a single package produced annually, they need not be. Different committees can review certain reports at different times during the year.

Figure 1

Overview and Structure of a Set of Dashboard Reports

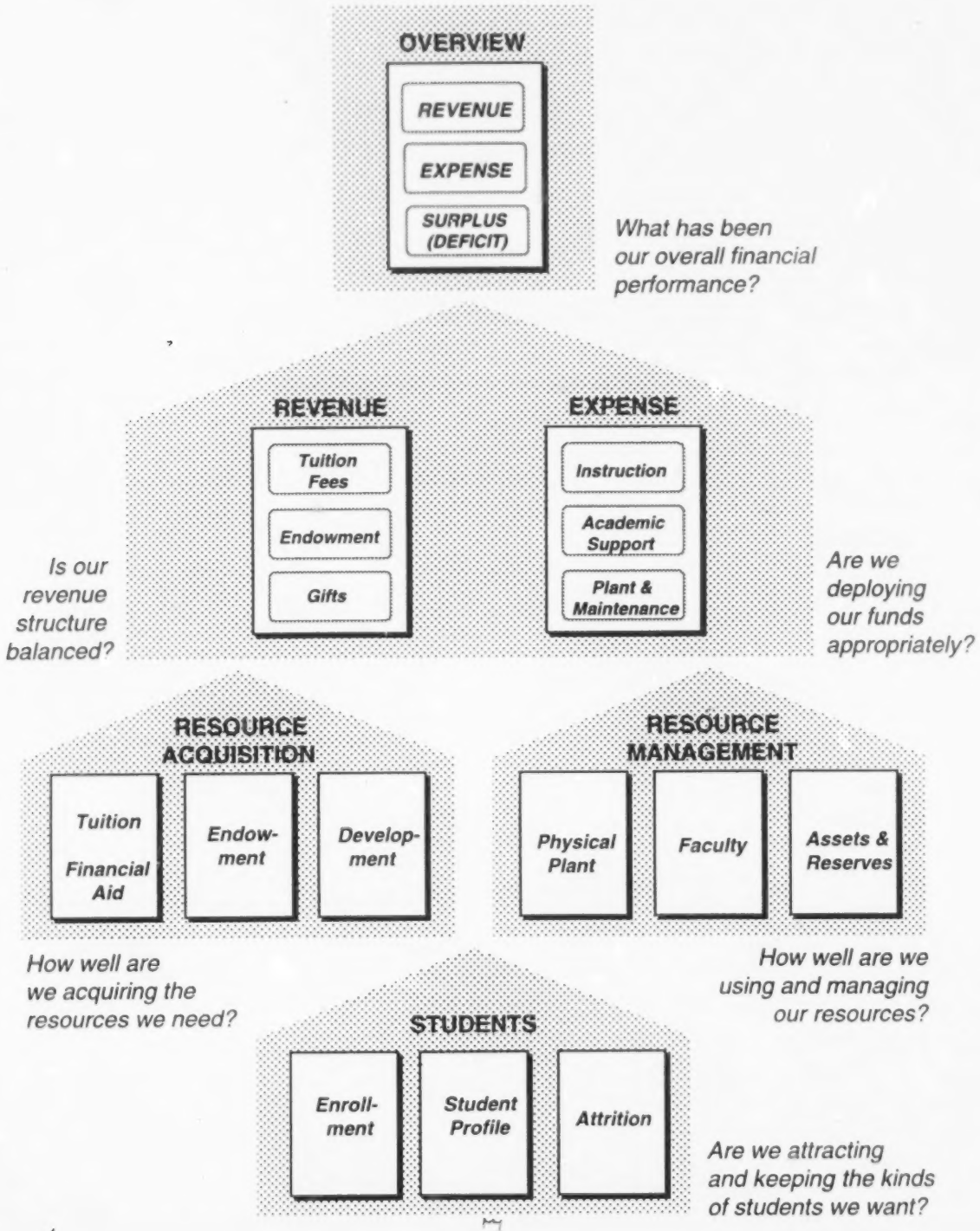
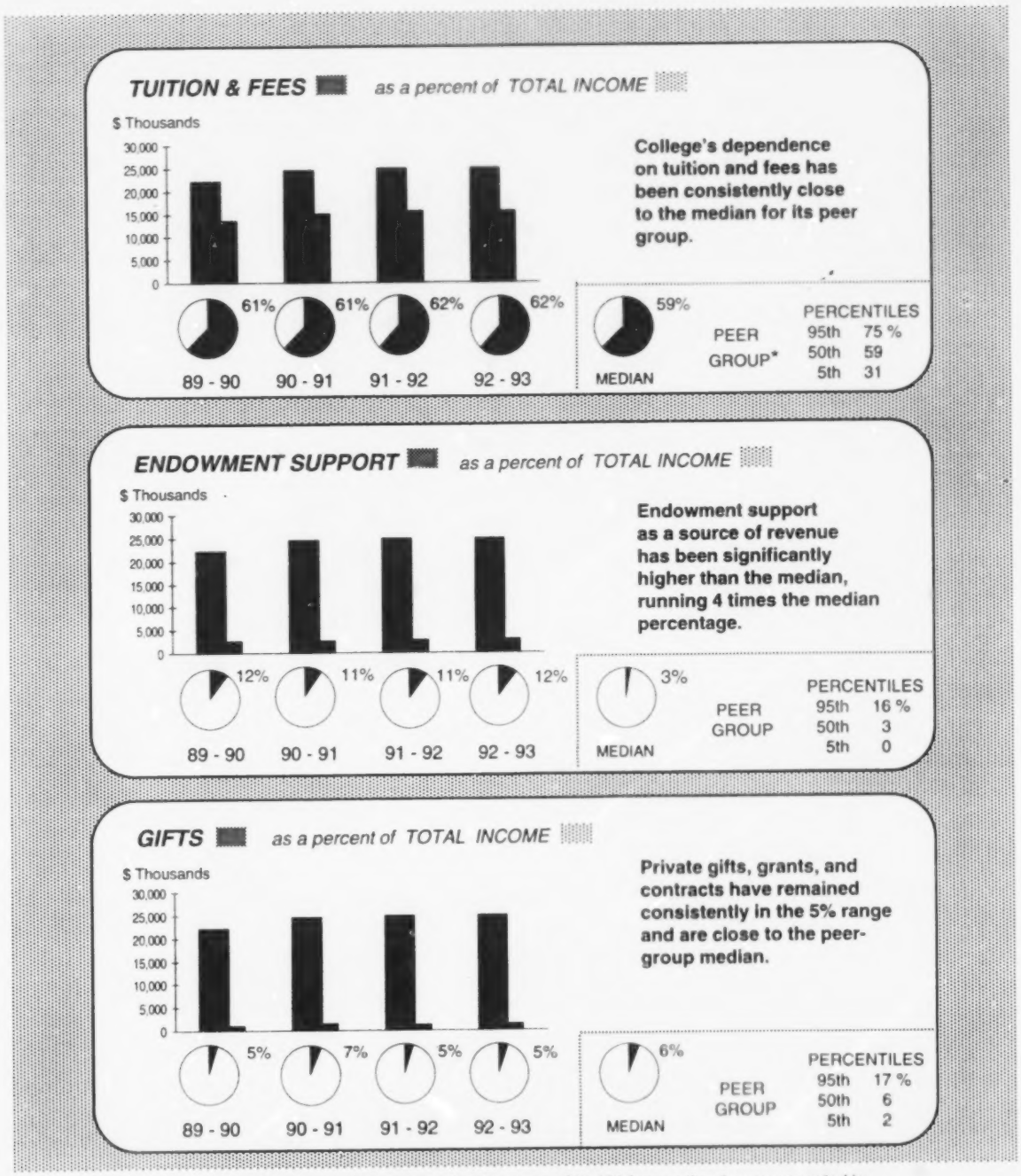


Figure 2

REVENUE DASHBOARD REPORTS



* Peer Group = 140 private four-year colleges with tuitions over $10,000 from national survey reported in: Taylor, Meyerson and Massey, *Strategic Indicators for Higher Education: Improving Performance.* Princeton, N.J.: Peterson's Guides, 1993.

WHEN THE FULL BOARD REQUIRES MORE DETAIL, COMMITTEE CHAIRS AND BOARD LEADERS SHOULD COMPARE CALENDARS AND CREATE AN AGENDA THAT ALLOWS CRUCIAL TOPICS TO BE PRESENTED TO THE FULL BOARD.

A final note about dashboard reports: They need not always be quantitative or numeric. They may take the form of a one-page cover sheet that summarizes narratives or commentaries about the status of a strategic direction or a mission-sensitive issue.

COMMITTEE REPORTS. The full board's need for information delivered efficiently can be balanced by a committee's need for greater detail, especially committees that are responsible for "predigesting" complex documents (such as budgets), distilling key points, and transmitting them to the full board.

Such reports to the board might highlight only those indicators that reflect an institution's performance on a strategic issue. They also can provide access to underlying information when the board requires more detail. The full board routinely receives the tip of the information iceberg.

When the board requires more detail, committee chairs and board leaders should compare calendars and create a meeting agenda that allows crucial topics to be presented to the full board. Some board leaders plan a year's agenda with specific meetings designated to highlight specific areas. Consequently, committees can establish their meeting agendas to mesh with the board's overall plan. Under this structure, the full board would continue to receive routine dashboard reports and in-depth reports at predesignated meetings.

This structure challenges traditional meeting arrangements—those in which committee meetings that occur before a board's plenary session require the committee to report to the full board on short notice. Further, this structure can elevate discussion, especially when an issue has been vetted over the course of two or three committee meetings.

Finally, it is impossible to anticipate all issues that need to be addressed by the board. Meeting agendas should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate discussions of nonroutine, significant issues that require the board's attention or action.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES. Dashboard reports and committee reports can be presented in several ways, depending on the information featured, the board's preferences, the capabilities of the institution's data systems, and staff availability and expertise. Three presentation styles follow:

1. Graphic Display. The appropriate use of graphics can make otherwise opaque, statistical reports more comprehensible and powerful, conveying large amounts of information in ways that enable trustees to better understand issues and trends. Boards should request that most undifferentiated, tabular data be converted into appropriate graphic displays—line charts, bar graphs, and pie charts, for example.

Two graphic techniques—highlighting and "warning lights"—are easy to use. With highlighting, key figures or data in a tabular report are printed in a box, a different color, or distinguished in some other way to underscore pertinent information. This technique is particularly useful in financial statements that may be required to retain a traditional format.

Warning-light reports deliver information only when an indicator exceeds acceptable thresholds predetermined by the board; this alerts the board to "nonroutine" data, whether positive or negative. This type of presentation can reassure the board that important factors are being *monitored* continuously, even when they are not being *reported*.

2. Comparative Context. Confronted with data, trustees often ask this question: Compared to what? Data describing institutional operations—enrollment, financial performance, student test scores, faculty salaries—gain meaning when they are presented in comparative context. Several types of comparisons are appropriate, depending on the report:

- *Budget Goals and Objectives.* How does actual financial performance compare with budget goals and other preestablished targets? All boards are familiar with the traditional actual-to-budget variance reports that display an institution's operating performance by line item against budget.

- *Trends.* How do the current year's results compare with those from the last five or ten years?

- *Market and Peers.* How is the institution performing in a particular area compared with (1) other institutions that compete for students, research dollars, and other resources and (2) other institutions that share similar characteristics, such as size, academic mission, or affiliation?

- *Norms.* How does the institution's financial performance compare with the norm for higher education institutions or other nonprofit organizations of a similar type or size?

Often, the very exercise of setting comparative standards, which requires the board to consider its own definition of "good" or "bad" performance, encourages the board to examine the institution's mission, values, and strategic concerns. For example, a value stressing "stewardship" might require the board to pay close attention to endowment performance.

"What if?" questions are yet another way to interpret data more effectively using comparison. In such cases, boards compare the present with the future to better understand possible consequences of particular policies or to predict the combined effects of various factors and best-case and worst-case scenarios. This kind of analysis is especially valuable in conveying an understanding of an institution's sensitivity to changes in some key variable, such as tuition revenue. It permits institutional leaders to extend historical and current data into the future, which is of great relevance to trustees as they carry out their fiduciary responsibilities.

3. *Presentation as Story.* Too many boards receive inches-thick reports of tabular numbers—raw data with little or no attempt to help trustees understand the significance of the material. These "fact books" represent one extreme on a continuum. On the other end are reports that convey information presented as a story. Between the two extremes are reports that offer increasing levels of detail and guidance.

The advantage of the "presentation as story" approach: It gives trustees the maximum amount of guidance in interpreting information. The downside: It does not encourage individual trustees to peruse freely through information, and it may inhibit individ-uals from developing their own insights.

This, then, is the tension inherent in supplying boards with information. Should institutional leaders actively guide the board in interpreting data, or should they submit reports that enable the board to reach its own conclusions on its own terms? No single balance will satisfy all boards or be appropriate for all situations. The extent to which a board welcomes or even tolerates staff guidance is a function of the board's culture, operating principles, relationships with staff, and degree of confidence in the accuracy, timeliness, and dependability of the information it receives.

SHOULD INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS ACTIVELY GUIDE THE BOARD IN INTERPRETING DATA, OR SHOULD THEY SUBMIT REPORTS THAT ENABLE THE BOARD TO REACH ITS OWN CONCLUSIONS ON ITS OWN TERMS?

The nature of information or the urgency of a situation also can affect a narrative presentation. A financial crisis, for example, would call for a straightforward story. A less urgent story, say an examination of trends affecting long-range plans, might benefit from a less linear presentation, thereby encouraging board members to develop their own connections and interpretations.

How Can Boards Receive Information Relevant to Governing?

One of the most valuable benefits of a board-information system may lie in its potential for defining the boundaries between governance and administration in ways that enhance both. To provide guidance in accordance with its basic governance responsibility while taking care not to duplicate responsibilities of administration, a board must focus on institutional values, mission, and strategy.

Focusing on Values and Mission. The challenge for boards lies not in accepting the importance of values and mission but in incorporating these considerations in its operations and making them come alive, particularly in the documents that constitute its information system.

THE BOARD SENDS SIGNALS BY AIMING A SPOTLIGHT IN CERTAIN DIRECTIONS—AN ACTION THAT CAN BE POWERFUL IN GUIDING THE INSTITUTION TOWARD ITS OBJECTIVES.

To help clarify how mission considerations affect board information, institutional leaders might consider adopting a conceptual view or paradigm of the board in relation to the institution. One such paradigm suggests the following four broad categories of information every board requires to respond to basic governance matters. Campus officials can ask questions such as these:

- ***Service Mix.*** In responding to the needs of our publics? Are we providing an appropriate mix of services? Are we meeting their needs?
- ***Service Quality.*** Are we providing these services at levels of quality acceptable to our publics and ourselves?
- ***Resource Acquisition.*** How effectively are we able to acquire the human and financial resources we need?
- ***Resource Management.*** Are we managing these resources with proper stewardship? Are we using financial resources efficiently? Are we fair in our dealings with employees?

Institutional mission can be tracked within this paradigm if officials ask these questions: What is our purpose? Whom do we serve, why, and how? Who are our other publics? What do we mean by "appropriate," "proper," "acceptable," and "effective"? How would a board's focus on institutional values and mission influence its information needs? Consider the following examples, using the foregoing information categories:

- ***Service Mix.*** A mission that emphasizes a theological seminary's existence as "preparation for ordained ministry" might require the board to receive information that monitors trends in society at large and among the constituencies that traditionally encourage lay versus ordained ministry.

- *Service Quality.* A mission that stresses the importance of the "highest standards of scholarship" might require monitoring and evaluating the scholarly research of faculty.

- *Resource Acquisition.* A mission committed to "reaching out to the underprivileged" might require the board to receive information that pays special attention to fund-raising for scholarships, financial aid, and other forms of student support.

- *Resource Management.* A mission that highlights "human dignity" might require the board to assess student, faculty, and staff attitudes toward the institution and how these individuals are treated.

As these examples suggest, the board's understanding of mission and values creates a heightened sensitivity that shines like a spotlight across a vast information landscape. The board sends signals by aiming that spotlight in certain directions—an action that can be powerful in guiding the institution toward its objectives. In this sense, a board-information system enables trustees to call attention to the issues the board considers important just as much as it enables administrators to inform the board about institutional performance.

THE VALUE OF SPECIFICITY. Institutional leaders can make broadly stated values and mission statements more explicit and thus more helpful in shaping an information system—and, ultimately, the decision-making process. For example, when the board expresses commitment to an "inclusive community, celebrating diversity" what does it really mean? Does "community" imply a critical mass of students gathered at one site? Could the institution serve students at remote locations and still foster community? Would growth in the student body beyond a certain size imperil a sense of community? Would a significantly smaller student group do the same? How much diversity is enough to provide the proper milieu?

When the typically vague and intangible concepts of mission and values take on greater specificity, all institutional leaders are better able to take action on critically important priorities.

SPOTLIGHTING STRATEGIC INFORMATION. "Strategy" often is made far more complicated than necessary. While the definition of "strategic issue" varies according to institution and circumstance, the following from *Strategic Analysis: Using Comparative Data to Understand Your Institution* (AGB, 1991) serves our present purposes:

"Strategic issues are those associated with the few areas that are critical to the success of the institution. The key for most organizations is to focus their most limited resources—the time of trustees and top administrators—on issues that really make the difference between success and failure."

When the board, the president, and senior administrators have identified the strategic issues relevant to their institution, they must determine how to assess the institution's effectiveness in relation to those issues. Specific elements of the board-information system should be designed to monitor and report on these strategic issues.

FREQUENTLY, AN ORGANIZATION'S FORMAL MISSION STATEMENT IS EXPRESSED IN SUCH LOFTY TERMS THAT IT LOSES POWER TO SERVE AS A DECISION-MAKING GUIDE.

The authors of *Strategic Decision Making: Key Questions and Indicators for Trustees* (AGB, 1987) recommend institutional leaders define indicators in each critical area of strategic decision making. Most likely, boards will benefit from a combination of indicators—some quantitative and some qualitative. Their number and combination vary with each board's level of concern and each institution's capacity to produce information.

Once a board identifies mission or strategic indicators, how might these indicators be integrated into a board-information system? In addition to building them directly into the foregoing dashboard and committee reports, other techniques may prove effective.

- ***Mid-level Documents.*** Frequently, an organization's formal mission statement is expressed in such lofty terms that it loses power to serve as a decision-making guide. In such situations, a board might call for the development of "mid-level documents"—those that bridge the gap between an overly general mission statement and an overly detailed strategic plan. In such cases, mid-level documents can feature measurable, mission-sensitive performance indicators.

- ***Strategic Plan and Budget Links.*** Recasting a strategic plan in mid-level terms appropriate to governance becomes even more valuable when the plan links strategic goals with the operating budget. The budget is one of the most important tools boards use in monitoring institutional performance. Linking a mission-derived strategic plan with a multiyear budget completes the governance "loop" in a particularly powerful way.

- ***Intraboard Communications.*** Boards can raise mission-driven questions and concerns through a specified board structure—the executive committee or some other committee—at designated times during meetings of the full board. Issues that cannot be explored fully during such appointed times can be tabled for subsequent meetings or a retreat.

How Can All Trustees Get Up to Speed?

Creating and maintaining a common base of understanding that supports genuine collective deliberation is difficult, at best. It becomes even more daunting when an institution is complex, has a long history, and a large board with high membership turnover and broad representation. Effective board-information systems—especially when they include orientation and continuing-education programs—can help enormously in promoting shared understanding.

For the purposes of this publication, orientation-program materials address fundamental trustee responsibilities, describe institutional and board history and culture, impart other information that changes infrequently, and present documents that support meetings. Continuing-education program materials generally include time-sensitive information: trends, issues, and higher education news and developments.

Orientation Programs. Trustee-orientation programs vary considerably among institutions, especially in terms of effort and time invested. Effective programs acquaint new trustees with the institution's history and culture, and they explain trustees' responsibilities and expectations clearly. Two documents typically are incorporated in orientation programs:

- *Trustee Handbooks.* This handbook usually contains general information about the institution: board bylaws and policies, trustee "job descriptions," biographical data and photos of trustees and key staff, board and committee meeting calendars, organizational charts, timelines of key institutional events, summaries of major academic programs, a mission statement, and a strategic plan. A regularly updated handbook can serve as an orientation resource for new board members and a refresher for established board members (who might otherwise find it awkward to acknowledge they do not fully understand background information).

- *Board Books.* Board books are premeeting packets, specifically designed to prepare trustees for upcoming meetings. Nearly every trustee complains at some point about receiving "too much paper" and "too much reading" in the hopes of reducing the quantity, sharpening the focus, and increasing the relevance of information. Even trustees who differ on how much detail is helpful agree that data supporting policy making and decision making are essential. (Public institutions must take care to comply with open-meeting laws and often are required to distribute more information than independent institutions.)

Board books should use "navigational aids" to help trustees focus on key issues and pending decisions. Some examples: tables of contents cross-referenced to the agenda, back-up information that supports agenda items requiring formal votes or other decisions, color-coded tab sections for committee reports or updates on strategic initiatives, cover sheets for each section or tab that summarizes key points, and documents printed on different colored paper for quick visualization of urgent information.

Separate from trustee handbooks and board books, which are distributed to all trustees, some institutions distribute summaries of minutes to individual board members on request. Also, some institutions link handbooks and board books with two cross-references: (1) In the board book, they include a glossary of common terms and summary descriptions of material from the handbook, and (2) in the handbook, they make space for dashboard reports and other summary reports from meeting-specific board books.

Although paper—usually too much paper—and oral presentations remain the most common media for board information exchange, multimedia presentations increasingly are gaining favor. Video and audio cassettes, floppy disks, e-mail, and dedicated Web sites no longer seem so exotic. No doubt future trustees will arrive at meetings equipped with laptop computers loaded with key institutional documents, or they will gain access to much information via an online database.

CONTINUING EDUCATION. All boards must keep abreast of trends and issues in higher education and society, sometimes a difficult task. Often, the best way to transmit higher education news, issues, and trends is in books, articles, newsletters; by presentations from faculty, students, and visiting speakers; or by attending conferences and workshops. Trustees also have much to gain from personally learning about their own institutions and peer institutions.

One tried-and-true method of informing trustees about current higher education issues is the president's letter. Many chief executives use these regular reports to the board to lay the groundwork for future policy decisions. Especially savvy presidents add layers of information with each subsequent letter to build the board's comfort level on external issues crucial to the institution that at some point will require board action.

CONCLUSION. There's nothing magical about any set of reports, however well-designed. Unless the board heeds and uses the messages the reports contain to set policy and guide their institutions more effectively, the exercise to create board-information systems has little purpose. Indeed, doing so without a real commitment to act on information could have negative consequences for the board and administration.

Therein lies the real challenge to college and university boards. A commitment to improved information really is a commitment by the board to become engaged on a continuing basis with the entire spectrum of an institution's mission-driven and strategy-related issues. Simply said, a commitment to better board information is a commitment to fully empowered trusteeship.

Resources

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BOARD BASICS

This publication is part of **Board Basics**, an AGB series devoted to strengthening the effectiveness of governing boards and trustees. Board Basics comprises several topic clusters—The Fundamentals, Financial Matters, Fund-Raising, Academic Affairs, Leadership, Strategic Decision Making, Foundation Relations, and Effective Committees—each of which contains several booklets. Several assumptions underlie the series:

- Academic trusteeship grows increasingly ambiguous, and board members need concise, accessible, and focused information to help them carry out their complex fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities.
- Basic principles of trusteeship remain constant across higher education, regardless of institutional type, size, and mission. The series highlights these general principles to provide board members with a core of knowledge they can apply to their individual situations.
- The series addresses the distinguishing characteristics of academic trusteeship, especially as it differs in scope, substance, and focus from corporate directorships and other board service.

AGB and the authors welcome comments and suggestions to improve this publication and others in the series. Call AGB publications at 800/356-6317 or visit our Web site at www.agb.org for more information.

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